Anchoring

In NLP, “anchoring ” refers to the process of associating an internal response with some environmental or mental trigger, so that the response may be quickly, and sometimes covertly, reaccessed. Anchoring is a process that on the surface is similar to the “conditioning ” technique used by Pavlov to create a link between the hearing of a bell and salivation in dogs. By associating the sound of a bell with the act of giving food to his dogs, Pavlov found he could eventually just ring the bell and the dogs would start salivating, even though no food was given. In the behaviorist ’s stimulus-response conditioning formula, however, the stimulus is always an environmental cue and the response is always a specific behavioral action. The association is considered reflexive and not a matter of choice.

In NLP this type of associative conditioning has been expanded to include links between aspects of experience other than purely environmental cues and behavioral responses. A remembered picture may become an anchor for a particular internal feeling, for instance. A touch on the leg may become an anchor for a visual fantasy or even a belief. A voice tone may become an anchor for a state of excitement or confidence. A person may consciously choose to establish and retrigger these associations for him or herself. Rather than being a mindless knee-jerk reflex, an anchor becomes a tool for self empowerment. Anchoring can be a very useful tool for helping to establish and reactivate the mental processes associated with creativity, learning, concentration and other important resources.

The notion of “anchoring ” emerged in NLP when Bandler and Grinder were first modeling the hypnotic techniques of Milton Erickson. Erickson often used or suggested particular cues as posthypnotic triggers to help a person change his or her internal state or reaccess a hypnotic trance. Grinder and Bandler generalized the use of these cues and triggers to include other types of internal processes, without the need of initially establishing a hypnotic state. By 1976 the first NLP anchoring techniques (such as collapsing anchors) were developed.

It is significant that the metaphor of an “anchor ” is used in NLP terminology. The anchor of a ship or boat is attached by the members of the ship ’s crew to some stable point in order to hold the ship in a certain area and keep it from floating away. The implication of this is that the cue which serves as a psychological “anchor ” is not so much a mechanical stimulus which “causes ” a response as it is a reference point that helps to stabilize a particular internal state. To extend the analogy fully, a ship could be considered the focus of our consciousness on the ocean of experience. Anchors serve as reference points which help us to find a particular location on this experiential sea, and to hold our attention there and keep it from drifting.

Similar to the Metaphor of a Boat or Ship, an Anchor Is a Reference Point that Stabilizes a Particular StateThe process of establishing an anchor basically involves associating two experiences together in time. In behavioral conditioning models, associations become more strongly established through repetition. Repetition may also be used to strengthen anchors. For example, you could ask someone to vividly re-experience a time she was very creative and pat her shoulder while she is thinking of the experience. If you repeat this once or twice, the pat on the shoulder will begin to become linked to the creative state. Eventually a pat on the shoulder will automatically remind the person of the creative state.

‘Anchoring ’ and Learning

A good way to begin to understand the uses of anchoring is to consider how they can be applied in the context of teaching and learning. The process of anchoring, for instance, is an effective means to solidify and transfer learning experiences. In its simplest form, ‘anchoring ’ involves establishing an association between an external cue or stimulus and an internal experience or state, as in the example of Pavlov ringing the bell for his dogs. A lot of learning relates to conditioning, and conditioning relates to the kind of stimuli that become attached to reactions. An anchor is a stimulus that becomes associated with a learning experience. If you can anchor something in a classroom environment, you can then bring the anchor to the work environment as, minimally, an associative reminder of what was learned.

As an example of this, they did a research study with students in classrooms. They had students learn some kind of task in a certain classroom. Then they split the class in half and put one of the groups in a different room. Then they tested them. The ones who were in the same room where they had learned the material did better on the exams than the students who had been moved to a different room. Presumably this was because there were environmental cues that were associated with the material they had been learning.
We have probably all been in the situation of experiencing something that we wanted to remember, but when we go into a new environment where all the stimuli are so different, it ’s easier to forget.

By developing the ability to use certain kinds of anchors, teachers and learners can facilitate the generalization of learning. There will certainly be a greater possibility that learning will be transferred if one can also transfer certain stimuli.

There is another aspect to anchoring related to the fact that Pavlov ’s dog had to be in a certain state for the bell to mean anything. The dogs had to be hungry; then Pavlov could anchor the stimulus to the response. Similarly, there is an issue related to what state learners are in, in order to effectively establish an anchor. For instance, a transparency is a map, but it ’s also a stimulus. That is, it gives information, but it can also be a trigger for a reference experience. An effective teacher needs to know when to send a message or not to send a message. If people have a sudden insight — an “Aha! ” — and you turn on a transparency, it is going to be received in a different way and associated in a different way than if people are struggling with a concept.

Timing can be very important. It is important for a teacher to time the presentation of material in relation to the state of his or her learners. If the teacher has a cognitive package to present, such as a key word or a visual map, he or she must wait for the moment that the “iron gets hot. ” When the teacher senses that there ’s a kind of a readiness, a surge, or an openness in the group, at that moment he or she would introduce the concepts or show the key words. Because the point of anchoring is that a teacher is not just giving information, he or she is also providing stimuli that gets connected to the reference experiences of the learners. This is why stimuli that are symbolic are often more effective anchors.

The kinds of questions that a teacher needs to answer are, “When do I introduce this idea? ” and “How strongly do I want people to experience it, or respond to it? ” For example, if the teacher is facilitating a discussion, an issue might arise that is deeply related to beliefs and values that is strongly felt, especially by some people. In that moment, if the presenter puts information out, it becomes connected with that degree of interest or involvement.

The point is that anchoring is not simply a mechanical matter of presenting cognitive maps and giving examples. There ’s also the issue of the state of commitment or interest of the learners. Sometimes a teacher will want to let a discussion go on, not just because people are making logical connections, but because the energy level of the group is intensifying, and you want to capture that moment. In other times, if the state of the group is low, the teacher might not want to anchor that state to certain topics or reference experiences.

People may use anchors to reaccess resourceful states in themselves as well as in others. It is possible for a teacher, for instance, to use a self-anchor to get into the state he or she desires to be in as a leader of a group. A self-anchor could be an internal image of something that, when thought about, automatically brings on that state; somebody one is close to, for instance. One could also make a self-anchor through an example. Talking about one 's children, or some experience that has a lot of very deep associations.
In summary, anchors employ the process of association to:

• focus awareness
• reaccess cognitive knowledge and internal states
• connect experiences together in order to:
- enrich meaning
- consolidate knowledge
• transfer learnings and experiences to other contexts

Cues that are anchors can help to transfer learnings to other contexts. The 'cue ' used as an anchor may be either verbal, non-verbal or symbolic (a person may even become an anchor). Common objects and cues from a person 's home or working environment may make effective anchors. Some common types of cues used to create anchors include:

• Stimuli • Symbols • Universals
voice tone metaphors analogies
gestures slogans common experiences
locations
key wordsEstablishing an Anchor

One of the skills of effective teaching or learning is being able to 'imprint ' something by catching those moments when information will be associated with positive or powerful internal states. Pavlov found there were two ways of creating associations. One was through repetition, the continual association between a stimulus and a response. The other had to do with connecting an intense internal state to a particular stimulus. For example, people remember the details of highly emotional experiences with no repetition at all. The association is made immediately.

These are two important aspects related to establishing an anchor. One is the continued reinforcement of the anchor. Pavlov found that if he started ringing the bell without giving the food, eventually the response to the bell would diminish and fail. For an anchor to last for a long time, it has to be reinforced in some way. This is an important issue with respect to continued self-learning.

The other aspect has to do with the richness and intensity of the experience one is attempting to anchor. As an example, let 's say a couple is preparing for childbirth. The husband is usually in the role of the coach to the expectant mother. One of the challenges of being a coach during birth is that the experience is so intense that it 's hard to transfer everything you know because the real situation is so different than the one in which you practice. You practice breathing and the various other techniques at home in a comfortable state, but when the reality occurs it 's a completely different situation that makes it difficult to remember all the techniques that you have practiced.

One helpful strategy is to make an anchor. When the expectant mother is in the state that she wants to be able to maintain throughout the birth process, she can make an internal anchor, such as a symbol. She could be asked, "What would symbolize this state? " Let 's say she imagines a nautilus shell — a snail shell that has a big opening on the bottom. The couple could then actually buy one of these shells. Then during all their practice sessions, the expectant mother could focus her eyes on the shell. The shell may then be brought into the hospital during the actual childbirth process, and be an ongoing trigger to help generalize the desired state to the actual birthing process.

As another example, let 's say a team leader is trying to get a group into a positive state for brainstorming, and has done a very nice job of creating a motivated state. The question is, how can the leader anchor that

Anchoring-Elaboration Cycle

The more that can be elaborated or elicited with respect to a particular concept or reference experience, the stronger that anchor will tend to be.

For example, music often affects people because of what was happening when they first heard a particular song. Something important or something significant in their life was going on and the song happened to be on the radio. This is the essence of "nostalgia. "
One can anchor by returning to specific examples, stories, or jokes. Think about being with a group of friends. When you repeat a story about some experience, you recreate the same feeling that you had when you were together before.

The word 'anchoring ' is itself an anchor. During this discussion, for example, we have been connecting a number of different reference experiences to the term 'anchor '. 'Anchoring ' is the term we keep coming back to in order to elaborate the richness of its meaning. Natural Anchors

Natural anchors relate to the fact that not all stimuli are equally effective as anchors. We form associations with respect to some cues more readily than others. Clearly, the ability to make associations with respect to environmental cues in order to choose appropriate responses is vital to the survival of all higher animals. As a result, various species of animals develop more sensitivity to certain types of stimuli than others. Rats, for instance, who are given two water dishes containing safe or tainted drinking water, learn very quickly to distinguish the safe from the tainted water if the tainted water is a different color than the safe water. It takes them much longer to learn to distinguish the two if they are put in two containers of different shapes. Color is a more "natural " associative anchor for rats than shape. Similarly, Pavlov found that his dogs could be conditioned to salivate much more quickly and easily with sound as a stimulus than if visual cues, such as colors and shapes, were used as a conditioning stimuli.

Natural anchors are probably related to basic neurological capabilities. Words, for instance, are able to form powerful anchors for humans, but not for other species. Other mammals (provided they can hear) respond to tone of voice more than the specific words being used. This is presumably because they lack the neural apparatus to be able to recognize verbal distinctions to the same degree of detail that humans do. Even in humans, some sense organs and parts of the body have more discriminative capacity than others. A person 's back or forearm, for example, has fewer tactile nerve endings than the fingers or palm of the hand. Thus, a person is able to make finer discriminations with the fingers and hands than with his or her back or arms.

The awareness of "natural anchors " is important in selecting types of stimuli to be used for anchoring. Different types of media can be used to help make certain types of associations more easily. With people, individuals may have certain natural tendencies toward certain types of anchors because of their natural or learned representational abilities. A visually oriented person will be more sensitive to visual cues; kinesthetically oriented people may make associations more easily with tactile cues; individuals who are auditorily oriented will be responsive to subtle sounds, and so on. Smells often form powerful anchors for people. This is partially because the sense of smell is wired directly to the association areas of the brain. Covert Anchors

Sometimes the most powerful anchors for people are those in which the stimulus is outside of awareness. These are called "covert " anchors. The power of covert anchors comes from the fact that they bypass conscious filtering and interference. This can be useful if a person (or group) is struggling to make a change because his or her conscious mind keeps getting in the way. It also makes covert anchors a powerful form of influence.

Anchors as Meta Messages

Anchoring is often considered to be a purely mechanical process, but it is important to keep in mind that we are not merely robots. Not all cues are neutral. A touch on the shoulder or arm may certainly be a stimulus from which to form an anchor, but it can be interpreted at the same time as a "meta message " about context and relationship. Many cues are not simply triggers for responses but are symbolic messages as well. Placing one 's hand on the upper center of another person 's chest (over the heart) is a stimulus, and is also a very symbolic gesture.
These types of symbolic and relational messages can be either a help or hindrance to anchoring, depending on whether or not they are aligned with the type of response one is attempting to anchor.
As a rule of thumb, for example, if you are using kinesthetic anchors, it is better to establish anchors for negative states toward the periphery of the body (i.e., knees, forearms, or locational anchors). Anchors for positive states can take on more intensity if they are established on areas of the body closer to a person 's center or core.

Well-Formedness Conditions for Anchoring

The "Well-Formedness Conditions " for anchoring summarize the key elements necessary for establishing an effective anchor. They essentially relate to important characteristics of both the stimulus and response one is attempting to pair up, to the relationship between stimulus and response, and to the context surrounding the stimulus and response.

1. Intensity and "Purity " of the Response
Intensity has to do with how fully a particular state or response has been accessed. Even from Aristotle 's time it was observed that the more vivid and intense a particular response was, the more easily it was remembered, and the more quickly it became associated with other stimuli. It was easier for Pavlov to "condition " hungry dogs to salivate, for example, than satiated dogs. If a person has accessed only a small amount of the state or experience you are anchoring, then the anchor can only be associated with that particular amount. Incidentally, "intensity " does not simply have to do with a person 's degree of emotional arousal. A person may be in a very strong disassociated state, in which he or she feels no emotional reaction at all.

"Purity " of response has to do with whether or not the response or experience you are attempting to anchor has been "contaminated " by other irrelevant or conflicting thoughts, feelings or reactions. It is possible that a person may very intensely experience the state to be anchored, but also mix it with other states and experiences. Another way to state this condition is that you will get back exactly what you anchor. As they say in the parlance of computer programming, "Garbage in, garbage out. " If reaching out to anchor someone with a touch makes him or her suspicious, then that suspicion becomes part of the state that is anchored. If you ask a person to think of something positive, but that person is recalling a disassociated memory of the event, and judging whether or not he or she has chosen the right event, then you will be anchoring disassociation and judgment.

2. Uniqueness of the Stimulus Used as the "Anchor "
The condition of "uniqueness of stimulus " relates to the fact that we are always making associations between cues in the world around us and our internal states and reactions. Some stimuli are so common that they make ineffective anchors, largely because they have already been associated with so many other contexts and responses. Shaking hands or touching a person 's shoulder are much less unique stimuli than a touch on the middle digit of the little finger. Unique stimuli make better and longer lasting anchors.
It is important to note that "uniqueness " is not the same as "intensity. " A more intense stimulus is not necessarily a more effective anchor. A more intense stimulus may be unique, but very subtle, even unconscious stimuli (such as the subtle smells and sensations that trigger allergic reactions), may be unique and thus very strong anchors.

3. Timing of the Pairing of Stimulus and Response

The relationship in time between stimulus and response is one of the key conditions of effective association. According to the basic 'laws' of association, when two experiences occur close enough together a sufficient number of times, the two experiences become associated with one another. Studies involving classical conditioning have shown that this association proceeds only forward in time; that is, the stimulus (the bell) must precede the response (salivating when eating food).

There also seems to be an optimal interval at which various types of associations are most easily made. For quick reflexes such as an eyeblink, this interval is about one-half second; longer or shorter intervals are less effective. For slower reactions such as salivation the interval is longer, perhaps two seconds or so. In learning verbal associations, timing is much less critical than in classical conditioning. Verbal pairs are learned with almost equal ease whether presented simultaneously or separated by several seconds.

In NLP, the optimal anchoring period is determined in relationship to the peak of the intensity of the response or state one is anchoring. It is generally taught that the stimulus should be initiated when the response to be anchored had reached about two-thirds of its peak. If possible, the anchoring stimulus should be held until just after the state has stabilized or begins to diminish. In this way, the association is created between the stimulus and the crest of the response. To do this, the response must be "calibrated," so that the behavioral characteristics of the response are known before the anchoring is attempted.

It Is Best to Provide the Anchoring Stimulus Just Before the Intensity of the Response Reaches Its Peak

The following sequence of photographs illustrates how to establish a 'kinesthetic' anchor by touching a person as he or she enters a positive state. The intensity of the state is reflected in the body posture and 'accessing cues' of the individual being anchored.

Eliciting the State to be Anchored

Establishing the Anchor When the State Reaches Its Peak

Releasing the Anchor When the State Is Past Its Peak

4. Context Surrounding the Anchoring Experience

Context is an important influence on anchoring that is often ignored. The context or environment surrounding an interaction contains many cues which may effect the anchoring process. Even though they are not the primary focus of attention, environmental cues can become anchors. In what is called "context association," the general environment may begin to elicit a response that is being conditioned to a specific stimulus. (Context association is the basis for "locational anchors.")

It is interesting to note, in this regard, that Pavlov first accidentally discovered the notion of conditioned reflexes as a result of contextual conditioning. For his research on digestion, Pavlov needed to collect saliva from his laboratory animals. He stimulated saliva flow by placing meat powder in the dog's mouth; soon he noticed the dog would begin salivating at the sight of the experimenter, in the expectation of receiving meat powder.

In some cases, contextual stimuli may combine with the primary anchoring stimulus, making the environment part of the overall anchoring experience. Because of this, many anchors are "context dependent." That is, they work more effectively in the context in which they were initially established. The influence of context relates to the process of 'Learning II'. In addition to being part of the anchoring stimulus, context shapes perceptual filters and attention. Anchoring is a classical 'Learning I' process, but humans and animals are not robots. Whether or not a context is interpreted as being "safe," "important," "unfamiliar," "a learning context," "a place to explore," etc., will determine which type of stimuli people pay attention to, and how readily and easily certain types of anchors will be established. From this perspective, it is important that the rapport between the individuals involved in the anchoring process and

the environment be conducive to the type of anchors one intends to establish. Exercise: Anchoring a "Resource " State

The following exercise applies the process of anchoring, and the "well-formedness " conditions for establishing an anchor, to the creation of a "resource anchor. " It is best practiced in a location where you can be focused and undisturbed.

Step 1. Choose a resourceful state you would like to experience more often (e.g., self-confidence). Identify a specific time in which you fully experienced that state.

Step 2. Relive the experience, associating yourself fully in your own point of view. See through your own eyes, hear through your own ears, and feel the sensations in your body. Take an inventory of the cognitive and behavioral patterns, both obvious and subtle, associated with the resource experience and your internal state:

a) Listen to any sounds or words associated with the resource experience.

b) Look through your mind 's eye at scenes and details of objects and events which make up that resourceful experience.

c) Get in touch with the sensations, both emotional and tactile, associated with feeling resourceful. Notice your body posture, breathing, etc.

d) Remember any smells or tastes related to the resource experience. When you have finished your inventory, stop thinking of the experience and shake off the state.

Step 3. Select a unique self-anchor. Identify some part of your upper body that is easy for you to touch, but which is not usually touched during daily interactions. For example, the palms of your hands, your shoulders, and even your cheeks are often touched by yourself or others in the natural course of daily interaction. Therefore, they do not usually make a unique enough trigger for an effective and lasting anchor. On the other hand, your ear lobe, the knuckle of your ring finger, or the skin in between your forefinger and middle finger can provide areas of unique stimuli that will not be "contaminated " by more random contact.

Step 4. Begin to reaccess the resource experience. As you feel that the state is about to reach its maximum intensity, touch or squeeze the part of your body that you have chosen as your anchor. Adjust the pressure of your touch or tightness of your squeeze to match the degree of intensity of your feeling of the resource state. After you have done this for a few seconds, stop thinking of the experience and shake off the state.

Step 5. Repeat 'Step 4 ' several times, each time enhancing your experience of the resource state by amplifying any submodalities (color, movement, brightness, etc.) associated with the state, and including all representational modalities (sight, sound, feeling, movement, smell and taste).

Step 6. Test your anchor by clearing your mind and simply touching or squeezing your self-anchor location. The associated experience of your resource state should arise spontaneously without any conscious effort. Continue to repeat steps 4 and 5 until you have easy access to your resource state.

Step 7. Identify some of the situations in which you would like to have more of your state. Imagine being in each situation and touch your self-anchor in order to create an automatic association.

As you do this exercise, pay attention to the cues and distinctions that allow you to access and discriminate between the representational systems you are accessing and the state you are creating.
You may also wish to establish anchors for yourself in this way for other states or experiences such as relaxation, creativity, motivation, etc. In a way, the pattern of this process is that embodied by all biofeedback: A certain state is selected and identified. As the individual accesses that state, he or she is given feedback for it by way of a particular stimulus — the tightness of the grip in this case (Ke); it is done

Extinguishing an Anchor

A common question that people have is, “How long does an anchor last? ” The answer to that question relates to how many of the “well-formedness conditions ” for anchoring it meets. An anchor made of an intense response, a unique stimulus, a well-timed association, and which has been appropriately contextualized, can last a very long time. According to Pavlov, some of the conditioned reflexes of his dogs were only extinguished with the death of the animal.
This holds true with negative anchors (such as phobias) as well as positive anchors, however. Sometimes it is useful to have a way of changing or “extinguishing ” an anchor. NLP provides a number of ways to have more choices about automatic anchors.

One of the most common methods of extinguishing an anchor is through the process of “systematic desensitization. ” This involves first entering a neutral or disassociated state, and then introducing the “problem anchor ” in small ‘doses ’. If someone experiences anxiety at seeing algebraic equations, for example, he or she would first be instructed to close his or her eyes and get into a very relaxed or confident state. Then, the person would open his or her eyes very slowly and look at the equations for only a brief period and see if he or she were able to stay in the relaxed or confident state. If not, the person simply closes his or her eyes again, re- enters and strengthens the relaxed or confident state, and tries again until he or she is able to look at the equations and maintain the positive state.

Another strategy to “reprogram ” an anchor is to “collapse ” the anchor with some other anchor or experience by simultaneously firing off two anchors together. In this case it is important to be sure that the state experience associated with the other anchor is of at least equal intensity and strength to the one you are changing (see Collapsing Anchors). Anchors which trigger beliefs, for instance, will need to be paired with other beliefs in order to have an effect.

Anchors may also be “reframed ” by placing them in contexts which shift the way they are interpreted or experienced. The NLP techniques of VK Disassociation, Chaining and Change Personal History provide other ways of “extinguishing ” or transforming problematic anchors.
(See Associative Conditioning, Chaining, Circle of Excellence and Collapsing Anchors.)
References:
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